



Emergency services discuss radio network improvements for state

By TOM LUTEY - Billings Gazette - 04/25/08

Montana emergency services, chronically hamstrung by an inability to communicate with one another by radio during crises, met in Billings Thursday to discuss a more reliable network.

Medics, firefighters, police and public works officials from across the state met to talk about a \$153 million radio system to allow them to coordinate action plans on the fly. Currently, with few exceptions, firefighters, police and other agencies responding to disaster cannot communicate well, if at all, attendees said.

"How many times do we go up and down the road and see a truck tipped over or a house burning and we see emergency vehicles there and assume they're talking?" said Chris Christensen, Public Safety Services Bureau chief of state Information Technology Services.

For myriad reasons, Montana's emergency workers aren't communicating as well as they would like. Agencies like the state highway patrol use different radio channels than a local sheriff's department or volunteer fire crew might. Nearly every emergency group in the state has its own place on the radio and when they try sharing a channel with other departments, the result is often no communication at all. Channels get jammed with too many people talking at once and no one's message gets out.

Christensen likens the dilemma to communicating on an old rural telephone party line, the kind of shared telephone service that allowed everyone to chatter and everyone to listen at once.

However, in regional groups, emergency officials have been working four years to clear radio traffic by pooling the federal funding they've received for Homeland Security projects. The groups are developing a single, statewide radio system that will encircle the state with high-powered microwave radio towers and other antennae by 2013.

Their federal funding is now collected by the state and deposited into an account for a single project. The towers, coupled with regional offices of operators and a command center in Helena should make uninterrupted emergency communications possible in 95 percent of the state.

Effective emergency communication isn't just a Montana problem, said Alan Michaels, Glendive police chief and emergency communications board member. Holes in emergency communications nationwide became a national issue after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. New York City police and firefighters, aware that the center's twin towers were about to collapse, weren't able to warn each other, Michaels said. Communications broke down again in the Gulf of Mexico during Hurricane Katrina.

Most states have since started developing radio systems that are interoperable, meaning that they allow various agencies to communicate with each other. Montana's system is further along than most, Michaels said, but still only about a third done.

A master headquarters building has been built in Helena, and surrounding Lewis and Clark County is fully networked. Microwave towers are now scattered across the Montana-Canadian border, in part because the federal government was already fortifying communications on the Northern Tier before Montana emergency officials began tackling the problem in groups. Southeast and Eastern Montana's share of the microwave backbone is scheduled for installation in 2009.

Federal Homeland Security dollars for the project are diminishing, as they are for many security and law enforcement programs that received a surge in federal funding after 9/11. However, several nonemergency agencies interested in reliable communications have since chipped in. Burlington Northern-Sante Fe has contributed more than a \$1 million to the cause. The Montana Department of Corrections, which relies heavily on communication with local police while transporting inmates, has contributed another \$2.6 million in one-time funding.